OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

The LITTLE GRAY LADY

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ONCE in a while there come to me out of the long ago the fragments of a story I have not thought of for years—one that has been hidden in the dim lumber room of my brain where I store my bygone memories.

These fragments thrust themselves out of the past as do the cuffs of an old-fashioned coat, the flutings of a flounce, or the lacings of a bodice from out a quickly opened bureau drawer. Only when you follow the cuff along the sleeve to the broad shoulder; smooth out the crushed frill that swayed about her form, and trace the silken thread to the waist it tightened, can you determine the fashion of the day in which they were worn.

And with the rummaging of this lumber room come the odors: dry smells from musty old trunks packed with bundles of faded letters and worthless deeds tied with red tape; musty smells from dust-covered chests, iron bound, holding moldy books, their backs loose; pungent smells from cracked wardrobes stuffed with moth-eaten hunting coats, riding trousers, and high boots with rusty spurs—cross-country riders these—roisterers and gamesters—a sorry lot, no doubt.

Or perhaps it is an old bow-legged high-boy—its clubfeet slippered on easy rollers—the kind with deep drawers kept awake by rattling brass handles, its outside veneer so highly polished that you are quite sure it must have been brought up in some distinguished family. The scent of old lavender and spicer rose leaves, and a stick or two of white orris root, haunt this relic: my lady's laces must be kept fresh, and so must my lady's long white mitts—they reach from her dainty knuckles quite to her elbow. And so must her cobwebbed silk stockings and the filmy kerchief she folds across her bosom.

It is this kind of a drawer that I am opening now—one belonging to the Little Gray Lady.

As I look through its contents my eyes resting on the finger of a glove, the end of a lace scarf, and the handle of an old fan, my mind goes back to the last time she wore them. Then I begin turning everything upside down, lifting the corner of this incident, prying under that bit of talk, recalling what he said and who told of it (I shall have the whole drawer empty before I get through), and whose fault it was that the match was broken off, and why she, of all women in the world, should have remained single all those years. Why, too, she should have lost her identity, so to speak, and become the Little Gray Lady.

And yet no sobriquet could better express her personality: She was little—a dainty, elf-like littleness, with tiny feet and wee hands; she was gray—a soft, silver gray—too gray for her forty years (and this fragment begins when she was forty); and she was a lady in every beat of her warm heart; in every pressure of her white hand; in her voice, speech—in all her thoughts and movements.

She lived in the quaintest of old houses fronted by a brick path bordered with fragrant box, which led up to an old-fashioned porch, its door brightened by a brass knocker. This, together with the knobs, steps, and slits of windows on each side of the door, was kept scrupulously clean by old Margaret, who had lived with her for years.

But it is her personality and not her surroundings that lingers in my memory. No one ever heard anything sweeter than her voice; and nobody ever looked into a lovelier face, even if there were little hollows in the cheeks and shy, fanlike wrinkles lurking about the corners of her lambent brown eyes. Nor did her gray hair mar her beauty. It was not old, dry and withered—a wispy gray. (That is not the way it happened.) It was a new, all-of-a-sudden gray, and in less than a week—so Margaret once told me—bleaching its brown gold to silver. But the gloss remained, and so did the richness of the folds, and the wealth and weight of it.

Inside the green-painted door with its white trim and brass knocker and knobs there was a narrow hall hung with old portraits, opening into a room literally all fireplace. Here there were gouty sofas, and five or six big easy chairs ranged in a half circle, with arms held out as if begging somebody to sit in them; and here, too, was an embroidered worsted fire screen that slid up and down a standard, to shield one's face from the blazing logs; and there were queer tables and old-gold curtains looped back with brass rosettes—ears really—behind which the tresses of the parted curtains were tucked; and there were more old portraits in dingy frames, and samplers under glass, and a rug which some aunt had made with her own hands from odds and ends; and a huge workbasket spilling worsteds, and last, and by no manner of means least, a big chintz-covered rocking chair, the little lady's very own—its thin ankles and splay feet hidden by a modest frill. There were all these things and a lot more—and yet I still maintain that the room was just one big fireplace. Not alone because of the size (and it certainly was big. Many a doubting curly head, losing faith in Santa Claus, has crawled behind the old firedogs, the child's fingers tight about the Little Gray Lady's, and been told to look up into the blue—a lesson never forgotten all their lives), but because of the wonderful and never told forgotten things which constantly took place before its blazing embers.

For this fireplace was the Little Gray Lady's altar. Here she dispensed wisdom and cheer and love. Everybody in Pomford Village had sat in one or the other of the chairs grouped about it and had poured out their hearts to her. All sorts of pourings: love affairs, for instance, that were hopeless until she would take the girl's hand in her own and smooth out the tangle; to say nothing of bickerings behind closed doors, with two lives pulling apart until her dear arms brought them together.

But all this is only the outside of the old mahogany high-boy with its meerschaum-pipe polish, spraddling legs, and rattling handles.

Now for the Little Gray Lady's own particular drawer.

It was Christmas Eve, and Kate Dayton, one of Pomford's pretty girls, had found the Little Gray Lady sitting alone before the fire gazing into the ashes, her small frame almost hidden in the roomy chair. The winter twilight had long since settled and only the flickering blaze of the logs and the dim glow from one lone candle illumined the room. This, strange to say, was placed on a table in a corner where its rays shed but little light in the room.

"Oh! Cousin Annie," moaned Kate (everybody in Pomford who got close enough to touch the Little Gray Lady's hand called her "Cousin Annie"—it was only the outside world who knew her by her sobriquet), "I didn't mean anything. Mark came in just at the wrong minute, and—and—" The poor girl's tears smothered the rest.

"Don't let him go, dearie," came the answer, when she had heard the whole story, the girl on her knees, her head in her lap, the wee hands stroking the fluff of golden hair disheveled in her grief.

"Oh, but he won't stay!" moaned Kate. "He says he is going to Rio—way out to South America to join his Uncle Harry."

"He won't go, dearie—not if you tell him the truth. And make him tell you the truth. Don't let your pride come in; don't beat around the bush nor make believe you are hurt or misunderstood, or that you don't care. You do care. Better be a little humble now than humble all your life. It only takes a word. Hold out your h l and say: 'I'm sorry, Mark—please forgive me.' If he loves you—and he does——"

The girl raised her head: "Oh! Cousin Annie! How do you know?"

She laughed gently. "Because he was here, dearie, half an hour ago and told me so. He thought you owed him the dance, and he was a little jealous of Tom."

"But Tom had asked me——"

"Yes—and so had Mark——"

"Yes—but he had no right—" She was up in arms again: she wouldn't—she couldn't—and again an outburst of tears choked her words.

The Little Gray Lady had known Kate's mother, now dead, and what might have happened but for a timely word—and she knew to her own sorrow what had happened for want of one. Kate and Mark should not repeat that experience if she could help it. She had saved the mother in the days gone by just such a word. She would save the daughter in the same way. And the two were just alike—same slight, girlish figure; same blond hair and blue eyes, same expression, and the same impetuous, high-strung temperament. "If that child's own mother walked in this minute I couldn't tell 'em apart, they do favor one another so," old Margaret had told her mistress when she opened the door for the girl, and she was right. Pomford village was full of those h litary likenesses. Mark Dabney, whom all the esent trouble was about, was so like his father at his age that his Uncle Harry had picked Mark out on a crowded dock when the lad had visited him in Rio the year before, although he had not seen the boy's father for twenty years—so strong was the family likeness.

If there was to be a quarrel it must not be between the Dabneys and the Daytons, of all families. There had been suffering enough in the old days.

"Listen, dearie," she said in her gentle, crooning tone, patting the girl's cheek as she talked. "A quarrel where there is no love is soon forgotten, but a difference when both love may, if not quickly healed, leave a scar that will last through life."

"There are as good fish in the sea as were ever caught," cried the girl in sheer bravado, brushing away her tears.

"Don't believe it, dearie—and don't ever say it. That has wreckel more lives than you know. That is what I once knew a girl to say—a girl just about your age——"

"But she found somebody else, and that's just what I am going to do. I'm not going to have Mark read me a lecture every time I want to do something he doesn't like. Didn't your girl find somebody else?"

"No—never. She is still unmarried."

"Yes—but it wasn't her fault, was it?"

"Yes—although she did not know it at the time. She opened a door suddenly and found her lover alone with another girl. The two had stolen off together where they would not be interrupted. He was pleading for his college friend—straightening out just some such foolish quarrel as you have had with Mark—but the girl would not understand; nor did she know the truth until a year afterwards. Then it was too late."

The Little Gray Lady stopped, lifted her hand from the girl's head, and turned her face toward the now dying fire.

"And what became of him?" asked the girl in a hushed voice, as if she dared not awaken the memory.

"He went away and she has never seen him since."

For some minutes there was silence, then Kate said in a braver tone:

"And he married somebody else?"

"No."

"Well, then, she died?"

"No."

The Little Lady had not moved, nor had she taken her eyes from the blaze. She seemed to be addressing some invisible body who could hear and understand. The girl felt its influence and a tremor ran through her. The fitful blaze casting weird shadows helped this feeling. At last, with an effort, she asked:

"You say you know them both, Cousin Annie?"

"Yes—he was my dear friend. I was just thinking of him when you came in."

The charred logs broke into a heap of coals; the blaze flickered and died. But for the lone candle in the corner the room would have been in total darkness.

"Shall I light another candle, Cousin Annie?" shivered the girl, "or bring that one nearer?"

"No, it's Christmas Eve, and I only light one candle on Christmas Eve."

"But what's one candle! Why, father has the whole house as bright as day and every fire blazing." The girl sprang to her feet and stepped nearer the hearth. She would be less nervous, she thought, if she moved about, and then the warmth of the fire was somehow reassuring. "Please let me light them all, Cousin Annie," she pleaded, reaching out her hand toward a cluster in an old-fashioned candelabra—"and if there aren't enough I'll get more from Margaret."

"No, no—one will do. It is an old custom of mine; I've done it for twenty ears."

"But don't you love Christmas?" Kate argued, her nervousness increasing. The ghostly light and the note of pain in her companion's voice were strangely affecting.

The Little Gray Lady leaned forward in her chair and looked long and steadily at the heap of smoldering ashes; then she answered slowly, each word vibrating with the memory of some hidden sorrow: "I've had mine, dearie."

"But you can have some more," urged Kate.

"Not like those that have gone before, dearie—no, not like those."

Something in the tones of her voice and quick droop of the dear head stirred the girl to her depths. Sinking to her knees she hid her face in the Little Lady's lap.

"And you sit here in the dark with only one candle?" she whispered.

"Yes, always," she answered, her fingers stroking the fair hair. "I can see those I have loved better in the dark. Sometimes the room is full of people; I have often to strain my eyes to assure myself that the door is really shut. All sorts of people come—the girls and boys I knew when I was young. Some are dead; some are far away; some so near that should I open the window and shout their names many of them could hear. There are fewer above ground every year—but I welcome all who come. It's the old maid's hour, you know—this twilight hour. The wives are making ready the supper; the children are romping; lovers are together in the corner where they can whisper and not be overheard. But none of this disturbs me—no big man bursts in, letting in the cold. I have my chair, my candle, my thoughts, and my fire. When you get to be my age, Kate, and live alone—and you might, dearie, if Mark should leave you—you will love these twilight hours, too."

The girl reached up her hands and touched the Little Gray Lady's cheek, whispering:

"But aren't you very, very lonely, Cousin Annie?"

"Yes, sometimes."

For a moment Kate remained silent, then she asked in a faltering voice through which ran a note almost of terror:

"Do you think I will ever be like—like—that is—I will ever be—all aone?"

"I don't know, dearie. No one can ever tell what will happen. I never thought twenty years ago I would be all alone—but I am."

The girl raised her head, a with a cry of pain threw her arms around the Little Gray Lady's neck:

"Oh, no!—no! I can't bear it!" she sobbed. "I'll tell Mark! I'll send for him now—to-night—before I got to bed!"

II.

It was not until Kate Dayton reached her father's gate that the spell wrought by the flickering firelight and the dim glow of the ghostly candle wore off. The crisp air of the winter night—for it was now quite dark—had helped, but the sight of Mark's waiting figure striding along the snow-covered path to her home, and his manly, outspoken apology, "Please forgive me, Kate, I made an awful fool of myself," followed by her joyous refrain, "Oh, Mark! I've been so wretched!" had done more. It had all come just as Cousin Annie had said; there had been neither pride nor anger. Only the Little Gray Lady's timely word.

But if the spell was broken the pathetic figure of the dear woman, her eyes fixed on the dying embers, still lingered in Kate's mind.

"Oh, Mark, it is so pitiful to see her!—and I got so frightened; the whole room seemed filled with ghosts. Christmas seems her loneliest time. She won't have but one candle lighted, and she sits and mopes in the dark. Oh, it's dreadful! I tried to cheer her up, but she says she likes to sit in the dark, because then all the dead people she loves can come to her. Can't we do something to make her happy? She is so lovely, and she is so little, and she is so dear!"

They had entered the house, now a blaze of light. Kate's father was standing on the hearth rug, his back to a great fireplace filled with roaring logs.

"Where have you two gadabouts been?" he laughed merrily. "What do you mean by staying out this late? Don't you know it's Christmas Eve?"

"We've been to see Cousin Annie, daddy; and it would make your heart ache to look at her! She's there all alone. Can't you go down and bring her up here?"

"Yes, I could, but she wouldn't come, not on Christmas Eve. Did she have her candle burning?"

"Yes, just one poor little miserable candle that hardly gave any light at all."

"And it was in the corner on a little table?"

"Yes, all by itself."

"Poor dear, she always lights it. She's lighted it for almost twenty years."

"Is it for somebody she loved who died?"

"No—it's for somebody she loved who is alive, but who never came back and won't."

He studied them both for a moment, as if in doubt, then he added in a determined voice, motioning them to a seat beside him:

"It is about time you two children heard the story straight, for it concerns you both, so I'll tell you. Your Uncle Harry, Mark, is the man who never came back and won't. He was just your age at the time. He and Annie were to be married in a few months, then everything went to smash. And it was your mother, Kate, who was the innocent cause of his exile. Harry, who was the best friend I had in the world, tried to put in a good word for me—this was before I and your mother were engaged—and Annie, coming in and finding them, got it all crooked. Instead of waiting until Harry could explain, she flared up and off he went. Her hair turned white in a week when she found out how she had misjudged him, but it was too late then—Harry wouldn't come back, and he never will. When he told you, Mark, last year in Rio that he was coming home Christmas I knew he'd change his mind just as soon as you left him, and he did. Queer boy, Harry. Once he gets an idea in his head it sticks there. He was that way when he was a boy. He'll never come back as long as Annie lives, and that means never."

He stopped a moment, spread his fingers to the blazing logs, and then with a smile on his face, said: "If ever I catch you two young turtledoves making such fools of yourselves, I'll turn you both outdoors," and again his hearty laugh rang through the cheery room.

The girl instinctively leaned closer to her lover. She had heard some part of the story before—in fact, both of them had, but never in its entirety. Her heart went out to the Little Gray Lady all the more.

Mark now spoke up. He, too, had had an hour of his own with the Little Gray Lady, and the obligation still remained unsettled.

"Well, if she won't come up here and have Christmas with us," he cried, "why can't we go down there and have Christmas with her? Let's surprise her, Kate; let's clean out all those dead people. I know she sits in the dark and imagines they all come back, for I've seen her that way many a time when I drop in on her in the late afternoon. Let's show her they're alive."

Kate started up and caught Mark's arm. "Oh, Mark! I have it!" she whispered, "and we will—yes—that will be the very thing," and so with more mumblings and mutterings, not one word of which could her father hear, the two raced upstairs to the top of the house and the garret.

SHE FOUND HER LOVER ALONE WITH ANOTHER GIRL.

Two hours later a group of young people led by Mark Dabney trooped out of Kate's gate and turned down the Little Gray Lady's street. Most of them wore long cloaks and were muffled in thick veils.

They were talking in low tones, glancing from side to side, as if fearing to be seen. The moon had gone under a cloud, but the light of the stars, aided by an isolated street lamp, showed them the way. So careful were they to conceal their identity that the whole party—there were six in all—would dart into an open gate, crouching behind the snow-laden hedge to avoid even a single passer-by. Only once were they in any danger, and that was when a sleigh gliding by stopped in front of them, the driver calling out in a voice which sounded twice as loud in the white stillness: "Where's Mr. Dabney's new house?" (evidently a stranger, for the town pump was not better known). No one else saw them until they reached the Little Gray Lady's porch.

Kate crept up first, followed by Mark, and peered in. So far as she could see everything was just as she had left it.

"The candle is still burning, Mark, and she's put more wood on the fire. But I can't find her. Oh, yes—there she is—in her big chair—you can just see the top of her head and her hand. Hush! don't one of you breathe. Now, listen, girls! Mark and I will tiptoe in first—the front door is never fastened—and if she is asleep—and I think she is—we will all crouch down behind her until she wakes up."

"And another thing," whispered Mark from behind his hand—"everybody must drop their coats and things in the hall, so we can surprise her all at once."

The strange procession tiptoed in and arranged itself behind the Little Gray Lady's chair. Kate was dressed in her mother's wedding gown, flaring poke bonnet, and long, faded gloves clear to her shoulder; Mark had on a blue coat with brass buttons, a buff waistcoat, and black stock, the two points of the high collar pinching his ruddy cheeks—the same dress his father and Uncle Harry had worn, and all the young bloods of their day, for that matter. The others were in their grandmother's or grandfather's short and long clothes, Tom Fields sporting a tight-sleeved, high-collared coat, silk embroidered waistcoat, and pumps.

Kate crept up behind her chair, but Mark moved to the fireplace and rested his elbow on the mantel, so that he would be in full view when the Little Gray Lady awoke.

At last her eyes opened, but she made no outcry, nor did she move, except to lift her head as does a fawn startled by some sudden light, her wondering eyes drinking in the apparition. Mark, hardly breathing, stood like a statue, but Kate, bending closer, heard her catch her breath with a long, indrawn sigh, and next the half-audible words: "No—it isn't so—How foolish I am—" Then there came softly: "Harry—" and again in almost a whisper—as if hope had died in her heart—"Harry——"

Kate, half frightened, sprang forward and flung her arms around the Little Gray Lady.

"Why, don't you know him? It's Mark, Cousin Annie, and here's Tom and Nanny Fields, and everybody, and we're going to light all the candles—every one of them, and make an awful big fire—and have a real, real Christmas."

The Little Gray Lady was awake now.

"Oh! you scared me so!" she cried, rising to her feet, rubbing her eyes. "You foolish children! I must have been asleep—yes, I know I was!" She greeted them all, talking and entering into their fun, the spirit of hospitality now hers, saying over and over again how glad she was they came, kissing one and another; telling them how happy they made her; how since they had been kind enough to come, she would let them have a real Christmas—"Only," she added quickly, "it will have to be by the light of one candle, but that won't make any difference, because you can pile on just as much wood as you choose. Yes," she continued, her voice rising in her effort to meet them on their own joyous plane—"pile on all the kindling, too, Mark; and Kate, dear, please run and tell Margaret to bring in every bit of cake she has in the pantry. Oh, how like your mother you are, Kate! I remember that very dress. And you, Mark! Why, you've got on the same coat I saw your father wear at the Governor's ball. And you, too, Tom. Oh, what a good time we will all have."

Soon the lid of the old piano was raised, a spinet, really, and one of the girls began running her fingers over the keys, and later on it was agreed that the first dance was to be the Virginia reel, with all the hospitable chairs and the fire screen and the gouty old sofa rolled back against the wall.

This all arranged, Mark took his place with the Little Gray Lady for a partner, the music struck up a lively tune and as quickly ceased. The sound of bells rang through the night air, and in the hush that followed a sleigh was heard at the gate.

Kate sprang up and clapped her hands. "Oh, they are just in time! There come the rest of them, Cousin Annie. Now we are going to have a great party! Let's be dancing when they come in; keep on playing!"

At this instant the door opened and Margaret put in her head. "Somebody," she said, with a low bow, "wants to see Mr. Mark on business."

Mark, looking like a gallant of the old school, excused himself with a great flourish to the Little Gray Lady and strode out. In the hall, with his back to the light, stood a broad-shouldered man muffled to the chin in a fur overcoat. The boy was about to apologize for his costume and then ask the man's errand, when the stranger turned quickly and gripped his wrist.

"Hush—not a word! Where is she?" he cried.

Mark gave a low whistle of surprise and pushed open the door. The stranger stepped in.

The Little Gray Lady raised her head.

"And who can this new guest be?" she asked—"and in what a queer costume, too!"

The man drew himself up to his full height and threw wide his coat: "And you don't know me, Annie?"

She did not take her eyes from his face, nor did she move except to turn her head once appealingly to the room as if she feared they were playing her another trick.

He had reached her side and stood looking down at her. Again came the voice—a strong, clear voice, with a note of infinite tenderness through it.

"How white your hair is, Annie dear; and your hands so thin. Have I changed like this?"

She leaned forward, scanning him eagerly.

There was a little cry, then all her soul went out in the one word:

"Harry!"

She was inside the big coat now, his strong arms around her, her head hidden on his breast, only the tips of her toes on the floor.

When he had kissed her again and again—and he did and before everybody—he crossed the room, picked up the ghostly candle, and smothered its flame.

"I saw it from the road," he laughed softly, "that's why I couldn't wait. But you'll never have to light it again, my darling!"

I saw them both a few years later. Everything in the way of fading and wrinkling had stopped so far as the Little Gray Lady was concerned. If there were any lines left in her forehead and around the corners of her eyes, I could not find them. Joy had planted a crop of dimples instead, and they had spread out, smoothing the care lines. Margaret even claimed that her hair was turning brown gold once more, but then Margaret was always her loyal slave, and believed everything her mistress wished.

And now, if you don't mind, dear reader, we will put everything back and shut the Little Gray Lady's bureau drawer.